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ABSTRACT

"Lennie," labelled early in life with an IQ number below 70, at age 25 and awaiting trial for murder took on the challenge of learning to read a complex, sophisticated language. He joined a class filled with people who were curious about the way words worked and who used the handbook "Crashing the Language Barrier: The English Language--The Way It Really Is" as the tour book for their journey through the English language. Lennie was introduced to concepts about language, not items to be memorized. He learned the sound/symbol relationship and its many variations, the principle of the digraph and syllables, the structure of the sentence, the principle of main idea and its development, and the role of language in people's lives. He contributed what he could to the group, and in return, the group respected his contributions and encouraged him. Lennie and the others in the group recognized the difference between learning to read and the act of reading itself. After 10 weeks, Lennie was able to read famous short stories together with the group. (RS)

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LENNIE LEARNS TO READ

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D. Murray

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Lennie * apologized for his presence when he showed up for the first time that evening in early May. He told us then that he knew he did not belong in a regular class like this one because he had always been in special education classes, but he added wistfully, "I always wanted to know how to read."

We quickly assured him that he belonged here with us. We were all, like him, curious about the way words worked. We invited him to join us in our struggle to make the English language work for us, not against us. Our tour book for the journey would be my book CRASHING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER: The English Language - The Way It Really Is. All that would be required of him on the way was to ask questions, look for satisfactory answers, and share both questions and answers with the rest of us.

In the weeks that followed that evening in May, Lennie found no trouble finding questions to ask. Finding satisfactory answers came a bit harder. For all he had brought with him that first evening, except for his need to know, had been the recognition of the printed names of the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. However, even this knowledge proved more handicap than help, for, as you all know, only the names of the vowels (A-E-I-O-U) represent their sounds in words. (/A/ as in /ate/.)

But when Lennie discovered there were only thirty-seven sounds to be recognized in the dialect we shared, he knew that he could learn to read. Even when he discovered that there were only twenty-six letters available to represent these thirty-seven sounds in our Western Pennsylvania dialect, he did not give up.

So Lennie, labeled early in life with an IQ number below seventy, at age twenty-five took on the challenge of a complex, sophisticated language that often seemed to be deliberately trying to confuse us.

---

* not his real name. (from steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath.)

The road to literacy for Lennie began when he found he could trust the symbols in a phonetic code I had devised to represent one, and only one, of the thirty-seven different speech sounds (phonemes) in our dialect. Here the five "long" vowels, the three diphthongs on the first line in the box and all consonants are represented by capital letters; the vocalics in the last line, in small letters. The blends like /SH/, /ŋG/ and the ubiquitous schwa /ə/ are the only sounds using unconventional symbols.

/A/ Age	/E/ wE	/I/ Ice	/O/ gO	/U/ Use	/OY/ bOY	/OW/ tOW	/OO/ bOOt
/B/ Be	/D/ Do	/F/ iF	/G/ Go	/K/ KiCK	/L/ Let	/M/ Me	/N/ No
/P/ Put	/S/ See	/T/ To	/V/ Van	/Z/ Zero	/ŋ/ long	/TH/ THin	/Č/ CHin
/J̌/ Just	/Š/ SHe	/Ž/ aZure		/H/ Heat	/R/ Red	/W/ Wed	/Y/ Yes
/æ/ can	/a/ all	/e/ met	/i/ it	/ə/ other	/oo/ foot	=	37

/Aǰ/	/WE/	/IS/	/GO/	/UZ/	/BOY/	/KOW/	/BOOT/

Confident that every capital <A> signaled the sound of its name, Lennie began to "hear" familiar words when he saw them on the blackboard or on the page in items I had encoded for him. Lennie had indeed crashed the barrier that had kept him illiterate. No matter that the words he read looked "different." For he would abandon the crutch of the code when he no longer needed it. Like others in the class, Lennie used the code to improve his spelling skills. Many times in these weeks of learning together we were aware that his classmates held back their own answers in order to give Lennie the additional time he needed to respond. The simple words he brought to class to illustrate a concept were as valid as the more complex examples others contributed. Lennie could laugh with us when we saw /KaF/ turn out to be the word <cough>. It was one thing to decode the sound; another, more difficult task, to write it in English.

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But it was only when he learned to process a word syllable by syllable, from left to right, across the printed page that Lennie began to read the pages he had been merely scanning to find sample words. And every hour spent "reading" was strengthening eye muscles to focus at the near point.

After he had proved for himself that the building block of every syllable was a sounded vowel

play ing = 2

and when he understood each of the four rules printers used to divide words at the end of a line

end'ing lit'tle pic'nic nev'er or se'vere

it was becoming apparent to us all that more than eye muscles were improving. Lennie had been learning to look and listen, to organize and evaluate, to draw valid conclusions between cause and effect.

He had been using these abilities as he went about finding words, copying them, assigning them to appropriate listings, unearthing letter patterns we were beginning to recognize in English words.

/ē/

e ee ea y ey ie ei i eo . . .

we see each baby monkey believe conceited police people.

He needed these abilities when the class realized that more than the mechanics of word processing would be needed to read for pleasure and for information. The class wanted to learn how to extract meaning from unfamiliar words they kept running into. They found meanings of roots and affixes in familiar words to apply to these same parts in unfamiliar words.

benefit benefactor manufacture manuscript

What strange words they would bring to class to talk about!

weird tantalize dilapidated

One evening Lennie brought in the word INTELLIGENCE for us to explain what the Latin root meaning 'choice' had to do with 'intelligence.' The silence that followed was explanation enough, even for Lennie.

The further into English we traveled, the more complicated we found the map.

— Large print Readers Digest - (discarded copies)
Charlie Brown Dictionary
other -

Words alone, fascinating as he had found their buried treasures, were not enough to make us competent readers. We found we must group them to find the referent intended. Only the combining of the first seven words would identify the individual who left the room.

The young girl in the red sweater left the room.

Then, too, an alien from outer space would need to be told who did what in these same ten words. The relationship between 'girl and 'left' would have to be explained to him. Every good reader recognizes intuitively word groups, the relationships within them, and the subject-predicate tie. He knows the importance of word order in English sentences.

Dog bites men. Man bites dog.

To test their ability to recognize grammatical structures in order to find meanings intended, we turned to the analysis designed by Professor Robert Allen*. He proposed that every statement expressed in its natural word order (subject-predicate) would fall into three parts, the first and last parts need not always be filled.

front)	trunk		(end
when where why how ...	subject	predicate	when where why how ...
At noon)	all students in the class	left the room	(for lunch.

Again, we used the large-print Reader's Digest to underline statements for analysis. We never found an exception to Prof. Allen's proposition.

Paragraphs were next to come under scrutiny. To fine tune the art of recognizing the topic, its basic assumptions and inferences, purpose and attitude, they wrote paragraphs of their own.

*Columbia University, Teachers College

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This first writing assignment asked for a description of an imaginary island of their own. They were given five guide lines to follow.

1. Plan a general outline (shape) of their island.
2. Choose five items and place them to be seen from a predetermined spot..
3. Use specific words, not general terms.
4. Limit the topic to description only.
5. Above all, never forget your reader.

After this disciplined approach, they would demand that writers also state their topic clearly and economically, develop it logically, and bring it to an acceptable conclusion.

Lennie's paragraph began with the words, "My island is a special place." Handwritten, in script, complete with margins and indentation, with few misspellings, no incomplete or runon sentences, his paragraph reflected his new skills and thinking ability, his growing respect for himself and the English language, and a bourgeoning trust in the world around him. Sadly, it also carried evidence of real cultural deprivation; for his island, in sharp contrast to the others, held only a road, car, garage, and a small hut.

From time to time, we stopped to discuss events in the past that determined the form of English today, words that we used that came from other times. Once we joined Harold on that hill above Hastings as he fought to keep the Normans and their language out of England. We sat in on one of King Alfred's compulsory palace classes to see English becoming a language to be respected abroad and at home, one that shaped the laws under which we live today.

After only ten weeks we could now read together famous short stories.. Lennie would take his turn reading while we read about JUSTICE in Stockton's LADY OR THE TIGER?, Broun's THE FIFTY-FIRST DRAGON , Jackson's THE LOTTERY. The last time I saw Lennie he was deep into reading Jules Verne's 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA.

In these times traveling together in the world of language, talking about talk, we had felt the pulse of English rhythms, and found the English language a living, changing thing. We experienced its power to shape our future, its limitations too as an instrument to express our intentions. We responded to the beauty of its metaphors and parables. We learned to respect its different dialects. We were on our way - a life time journey - to greater language skills.

FOOTNOTE

Newspaper reporters described Lennie for their readers as they saw him awaiting arraignment* before the law several weeks before he had walked into our prison English class that evening in early May.

"He stood alone, head bowed, poorly dressed, an illiterate, unable to read, write, or compute, with a mentality far below average," they wrote.

Reporters described him again months later as he stood once more before the bench with his defense attorney to hear the sentence imposed by a jury of his peers.

"A goodlooking young man, well groomed, alert but calm, said to be slightly retarded."

They commented on his dignity after the State's pronouncement of justice(?).

But, after all, had not Lennie survived darker dungeons in his time?

INSERT

That there should one man die ignorant
who had capacity for knowledge,
this I call a tragedy.

Thomas Carlyle
1795 - 1881

* for murder

CONCLUSION

After hearing Lennie's story, you may be wondering what is so different about the way he learned to read ~~and~~ from other programs.

May I point out some of these differences?

1. Lennie was lead to recognize the first mandates English imposes on all who read: English must be processed from left to right, line by line, even when scanning and speed reading.

2. Lennie was introduced to concepts about language, not items to be memorized. These concepts he proved for himself were useful.

the sound/symbol relationship and its many variations.
the principle of the digraph & syllable
the structure of the sentence
the principle of main idea and its development
use of derivations to unlock meaning of unfamiliar words
the nature of communication itself and the role of language in our lives

3. Lennie was required to contribute what he could to the group. In return the group respected his contributions and encouraged him. Learning together is far more stimulating & effective than working one-to-one.

4. Lennie was made aware of the abilities to listen, observe (same and different, etc.), organize his findings, evaluate them, and draw conclusions about them.

5. Lennie and the others recognized the difference between learning to read and the act of reading itself, like the difference between learning to drive and driving.

6. Lennie and the others learned to read as adults, not children. A member of the Pa. Dept. of Ed. once told me that as far as he was aware, my program was the only one written for adults only, not as remedial, redolent of past unhappy experiences and failures.

Alexis de Toqueville said it two hundred years ago. When citizens in a democratic form of government look to a centralized distant bureaucracy to solve their local problems, that system of government is doomed to fail.

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